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June 20, 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. BUNDY

SUBJECT: The Missile Gap

As Mr. Nitze's cover letter says, there is ample evidence on the public record of the late 1950s to substantiate why many people believed that the US was, or would be, behind the USSR in the production and deployment of ICBMs. The backup appendices to the Nitze letter are more indicative than exhaustive, more illustrative than comprehensive. We can certainly mine the files further to develop a more tightly reasoned case, if you would like to have this done.

I believe that there were three sources of information--two public and one classified--that would have persuaded a member of Congress in the late 1950s that a missile gap would exist.

Public testimony and statements by government officials.

The ISA memorandum of record attached to Mr. Nitze's letter refers to public statements by two Defense Secretaries (McElroy and Gates), the Director of CIA, the head of DDR&E, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of the Air Force, and at least one of the Service Chiefs during the period 1958 to 1960 which acknowledged in some way or other that there would be a missile gap. It is true that some of these individuals later modified their positions, and that others were contradicted by various members of the Administration. All attempts to deny any such gap notwithstanding, the report in February of 1960 that the Director of CIA had said the Russians would have a two-to-one advantage in ICBMs in mid-1960 was certainly enough to confirm the mounting suspicions of critics of the Administration's defense policy.

A word about the conflicting statements of Eisenhower officials seems in order, since the ISA memorandum of record points out that their public testimony indeed was often conflicting. The very uncertainty and apparently shifting nature of the Administration's position persuaded many people to give the benefit of the doubt to the Russians, particularly in 1958 and 1959 when the West saw the Russians as nine feet tall because of the Soviet success with Sputnik in October of 1957, and also

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because informed opinion and policy makers in the US knew of the pessimistic forecasts of the Gaither report and the intelligence estimates. In 1959 and 1960, Administration denials remained suspect because they came from an Executive Branch committed to hold defense expenditures to a minimum.

In short, officials of the Eisenhower Administration themselves created the environment and made the case that there was a missile gap--and presented considerable evidence to back it up.

Criticism by knowledgeable defense critics. Public statements by members of the Administration were reinforced by the writings of respected and informed defense critics. From 1958 through as late as early 1961, the books on defense policy most influential acknowledged the coming missile gap. General Gavin led off in 1958 with his matter of fact prediction; General Taylor followed in late 1959; and Henry Kissinger again sounded the alarm in early 1961. Brief excerpts from their books are in appendix D of the Nitze letter. These three critics were known to be conservative in their assessments of the importance of massive strategic nuclear power, yet each of them saw the US faced with considerable dangers during the early 1960s because of the missile gap. Their views thus carried much more weight than would have the same call sounded (as it was) by Air Force advocates.

Intelligence briefings before Congressional Committees. In addition to the public record, there were other reasons why a senator in the late 1950s would have believed that there was a missile gap. In January 1959 CIA briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Russians would have 100 ICBMs in mid-1961 and the capability to produce 500 by mid-1962. At this time US estimates for our own ICBMs were much smaller, although the precise number purposely was seldom mentioned. Again in 1960 CIA briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, estimating this time 250-350 Russian ICBMs in mid-1962, and 350-450 in mid-1963. Our own projections still called for a considerably smaller number of US missiles. (With the exception of the figures in this paragraph, this memorandum probably is unclassified.)

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Thus, there were valid reasons which led individuals to accept the existence of a missile gap in the late 1950s; I would think there would be no difficulty in developing a case to remind the public of the then available evidence. A more complex task--but it can be done--will be to develop from the public record alone what happened to the missile gap. Adam Yarmolinsky pointed out in his last memorandum on this subject that, if in early 1961 newspapermen came away from a background briefing with the idea that Secretary McNamara believed there was no missile gap, it was because the Secretary wanted to dispel any ideas that the US would no longer be able to defend its vital interests. This was certainly a valid concern, and it was unfortunate that the briefing was reported to indicate the missile gap had disappeared. The President at the time said he would reserve judgment until a study then under way had been completed. Since in May 1961, the public record shows that Secretary McNamara told the House Appropriations Committee that the missile gap remained, there is still some maneuver room on the issue about what the Secretary did or did not say in February, should such become necessary.

On your return from Europe, I shall have for you what I had hoped to have by now but have not been able to pull together to my satisfaction: a survey of the public record of what this Administration has done about the missile gap, some alternatives on how to deal with the matter within the next year, and a few potential pitfalls along the way. Both the Yarmolinsky memorandum and the Nitze letter touch on some of these matters; I believe it now would be useful to go a bit further.

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